

The Association of Teachers of English of Quebec continues to support literacy through its annual conference, Springboards, availability of literacy trunks, and various grants and subsidies.

Heed the experts!

Heritage Regional High School recently hosted a myriad of activities during the month of April, typically poetry month. From day one, students received a poem and information about the author and or time period, in the daily announcements. Visiting authors offered workshops throughout the month.

St Lambert poet **Carolyn Marie Souaid** engaged students in poetry workshops. As a youngster, Ms Souaid felt that poetry was something that teachers held the key to and that she was not privy to its secrets. She told students that nothing is further from the truth. Poetry is accessible and allows its readers to access a world both of metaphors and reality. Ms Souaid told students to make writing authentic and in turn it will be relevant.

Using paintings by the Group of Seven artists as a springboard to interpreting the visual, groups of students examined the artists' choice of colors and content in the paintings. Developing a keen sense of observation is indispensable to writing and makes interpretation that much easier. Ms Souaid's prompts further facilitated the writing process for students to write their own poems.

Monique Polak, YAL novelist, reaffirmed the adage "show, don't tell". She told students that there is a teen market for good novels and that if students were interested in writing, then they should persevere and not relinquish their dreams.

An important part of the process is fostering a writing discipline – write something each day – any ordinary or out of the ordinary events observed during the day; listen and record snippets of conversations overheard; keep a writing journal; and, read and write as much as one can. Cultivating and nurturing observation skills are primary to developing a good story.

Monique also presented a slide presentation of her trip to Czechoslovakia and Theresienstadt, a 'model' concentration camp, and the basis for her latest novel, *What World Is Left*. Above all, students were encouraged to ask questions and seek answers – skills that will help sustain the writer in all.

Robert Morrison, West Island author, read from his memoir, *To Pause and Flutter By*. Students learned that writing can be a cathartic process and helps the writer make sense of important events which have affected his learning and views, and of course been guiding principles.

In essence, the memoir must be truthful. However, as Morrison explained, there is some flexibility in terms of the structure of the memoir – names are changed; characters may be amalgamated; events may be compressed in terms of timelines; and the spirit of the dialogue is recreated. Those who have been part of the past can identify with the spirit of the memoir.

Students were interested in the role of the editor versus artistic control of writing and the ethical and legal questions of publishing a memoir. Mr. Morrison told students, that, like works of art become the property of the buyer, so a publisher makes decisions about titles, cover pages, and final editing of product. Mr. Morrison encouraged students to write and capture in print what is in their souls, and essentially be true to themselves.

Stephen Orlov is a playwright and author of *Freeze*, a play about the ice storm in Quebec, performed at Centaur Theatre. Mr. Orlov spoke of the magic of theatre and creating an ambiance that theatre goers will identify with and enjoy. He engaged students in a discussion of using memory "to put them in the story" and creating a mood. Theatre brings people together to share an experience. Students were able to make connections between what happens in their life and

the total theatre experience as it brings people together to suspend the moment and share a story.

Right from the start, Mr. Orlov put students through the paces of creating atmosphere in a theatre. He asked students to recreate the sounds associated with snow storms – spinning tires; snow blowers; water dripping; whirling wind, to name a few. In each group, one student read the part of Nicole, and another read stage directions. Mr. Orlov discussed the importance of voice and dialogue in recreating authentic characters. Students learned that together with choosing authentic characters, creating a commonly shared atmosphere and mood, using stage directions to move the story forward, having a conflict to create suspense, sound effects and lighting play important roles in the whole theatre experience.

Mr. Orlov mentioned that there are three basic ingredients to make it as an artist: skills, determination, and good timing. However the most important is perseverance. He told students to listen to stories around them and be observant of their surroundings. Students have the technological tools to produce their stories, especially making movies.

These worthwhile engagements with writers and the ensuing discussions are valuable and effective tools to garner interest and inspire students to become perceptive readers and observers and, in turn, keen writers. Students were encouraged to keep journals and read extensively. Desire, determination, and skills do go hand in hand, yet the universal message each writer gave students is that, above all, they must persevere and not give up on their dreams.

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Author visits 2009